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AUTHOR Mahala, Daniel
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ABSTRACT

As a radical supplement to multiculturalism a liberatory pedagogy is needed that explicitly challenges social conditions and ideologies that reproduce inequality. In training new teaching assistants of composition, a teacher used Jane Tompkins' "Pedagogy of the Distressed" to try an experiment in critical pedagogy. In her text, Tompkins argues that the performance model of teaching is the dominant model of alienated teaching in academia today. In an introductory literature course organized around the theme of growing up in America as represented in the autobiographies of Russell Baker, Richard Wright, and Maxine Hong Kingston, a substantial portion of class time was given over to student direction. Class experiments, however, in trying to "desocialize" students from sexist, racist, and classist ideologies acquired in previous educational experience were only intermittently successful. Possibly this is because literature teachers and students have been traditionally socialized to think of literature in some ideologically purified sense, above the temporal fray of historical conflict. Tompkins' pedagogy can be an effective way to transcend the traditional performance model of teaching, contribute to the empowerment of students, and enhance multicultural awareness--as long as teachers maintain constant dialogue among themselves and provide adequate space for students to develop independent voices and overcome feelings of cultural hegemony. (RDS)

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Daniel Mahala
Univ. of Maine
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Daniel Mahala
Univ. of Maine
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Empowerment/Being All That You Can Be:
An Experiment Towards a Multiculturalist Practice

Recently, the movement to create a multicultural curriculum in universities has provoked escalating levels of denunciation among conservative and even self-proclaimed "liberal" opponents. According to a recent issue of The New Republic, which devotes itself to campus racism, the movement to institute multicultural curricula in universities represents a totalitarian orthodoxy of politically correct thinking, replete with trappings of "academic cultism," and "paranoia" (40). Perhaps such reactionary hysteria is encouraging, an indicator that significant change is brewing as we work to pluralize academic cannons, and illuminate the power effects of knowledge in our institutions. I'd like to think so. But the mere fact that teachers may be bringing more writers who represent the experience of historically disenfranchized social groups into their classrooms, may be encouraging their students to talk more about their experiences of oppression -- such activity does not necessarily mean that oppressive social

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formations are being challenged or reconstructed in any given classroom. In my own classroom, I have found that many, usually most, of my students are capable of wresting from even the most outrageous accounts of oppression confirmation of what most concerns them -- the need to sustain mainstream values and assimilate professional skills in a time of intensifying competition for positions in what seems to be a shrinking middle class. Hence the need for liberatory pedagogy, which I'd like to develop here as a radical supplement to multiculturalism, a practice that involves explicitly challenging social conditions and ideologies that reproduce inequality, and devising possible goals and strategies of reconstructing them.

This past term my experience of training new teachers of composition led me to try a pedagogical experiment. I make no claim to originality: my experiment was gotten second-hand from Jane Tompkins' recent article in College English, "Pedagogy of the Distressed," which was perhaps the most influential text advancing some version of critical pedagogy that I had assigned to the T.A.'s I had been training in ENG 693, a course in "Teaching College Composition." Tompkins follows Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed in arguing that "to the extent that the teaching situation reflects the power relations currently in force . . . to that extent will the students themselves, when they come to power, reproduce that situation in another form. . . . [thus], if political revolution is to succeed, pedagogy must first enact that very unalienated condition which the revolution presumably exists to usher in" (653). Tompkins explains that she

enacted this unalienated condition in her own classroom by having the students themselves present the course material on most days, giving them feedback in advance (but no grades) on their strategies of presentation and ideas. This strategy also helped her overcome her own alienated and distressed condition as a teacher which, she explains, consisted in her fear, instilled through the typical trial-by-fire methods of graduate school training, that she might be a fraud who could only prevent exposure by performing her competence flawlessly, day in day out, in front of students or colleagues. This performance model of teaching, based on an inculcated fear of exposure, she argues, is the dominant model of alienated teaching in academia today.

The T.A.'s in ENG 693 were captivated by Tompkin's account partly because they had been convinced by me of the need to challenge inequality in their classrooms, but also acutely felt the fear of being exposed as frauds, having only the dubious authority of T.A.'s anyway, and novice ones at that. But what I think the T.A.'s (and I myself) really found most attractive in Tompkins' account was the thought that an easy congruence could be found between, on the one hand, the goal of dramatizing the students' authority <u>over</u> the material of the class, and, on the other hand, the goal of reconstructing conditions that reproduce inequality in our society. All this, we thought, could readily be achieved if only the right pedagogical mix was used. This easy congruence of utopian means and goals is, I might add, a common feature of many critical pedagogies, including that of Ira Shor which Lil Brannon just represented, that feature the utopian

means of "dialogue" and "empowerment" to achieve the ends of "desocializing" students from sexist, racist and classist ideologies which often have saturated their prior educational experience. Can students be desocialized through dialogue, and if so, just what kind of dialogue might this be?

The T.A.'s enthusiasm for Tompkins' essay last term was enough to get me to overcome my doubts this term, enough at least to get me to assign one day each week of class time to pairs of students who would present the reading material for class that day. The course in which I am currently trying this method is an introductory literature course that I organized around the theme of growing up in America as represented, so far, in the autobiographies of Russell Baker, Richard Wright, and Maxine Hong Kingston. In addition, I supplemented this literature with a few critical readings which would, perhaps, give students some useful critical terms for interpreting the literature, and raise some of the issues I wanted to raise in class. I should also note that, with a single exception, the class is entirely white. Giving over a substantial portion of the class time to student direction was, for me, a way of visibly committing myself to the idea that this would be <u>their</u> class, that I must remain open (since it is a truism of post-modern criticism that all reading is misreading) to the variable ways students would "misread" these texts.

Soon after the class began, however, I began to feel uncomfortable. When I had put together the reading list I had had a whole series of ideological purposes which part of me felt were being dissipated in my concern to give most of the

interpretive work of the class to my students. I had not fully admitted to myself that I had wanted to examine how social life was reproduced in each of the represented historical settings, how the protagonists in this literature were shaped by, but also managed at crucial moments to resist, the pressures of family life, educational systems and mass media. I had wanted my students to see how typically American ideas of "freedom," "optimism" and "individualism" sometimes functioned oppressively in relation to the protagonists in the literature, and how similar ideological pressures and social forces might be operating with destructive effects in the socializing environments both myself and my students were experiencing in our own lives.

For instance, in our reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, there were certain kinds of cultural and ideological work which I had not acknowledged that I wanted this text to do. I wanted this text to show how much the experience of Maxine and her family contrasted with the stereotype of the "model minority" Chinese immigrant who came to America to find "the Gold Mountain," found it in engineering school, and never looked back. I wanted students to see that Maxine struggles not so much to assimilate American ways as to transform the frequently misogynistic Chinese traditions in which she came to consciousness, to make a habitation and identity for herself in this "other" cultural space. Maxine recoils with horror at her relatives' epigramatic references to killing girl babies: "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in

girls" (62), they said. But Maxine also seizes on her mother's stories of female power, like the story of the woman warrior who overcomes armies of evil barons through supernatural powers. Thus Maxine's book represents her struggle to wrest meanings from the often unfertile ground of Chinese tradition that she needs to support her own and her people's development in America. Finally, the "freedom" she achieves is not the acquisitive freedom of consumer culture, but a freedom defined by her struggle to locate a voice capable of speaking against both the leveling pressures of American rationalism and acquisitiveness, and the superstitious misogyny of Chinese culture. And, although she does not finally succeed in reconciling her created voice with the traditional voices in her community, she does express hope for an eventual collective reconstruction of her people's cultural identity. In her words, "[t]he swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" (62).

No doubt, my questioning and contextualizing of Kingston's autobiography signaled to perceptive students that my interpretation of this book followed this line. But the way I had renounced my role as performer did not really allow me to take on this interpretation as my own. Thus, I never really oriented this text against the mythology of America as a "melting pot" in which immigrants "make it" by confining their cultural differences to their cooking. The result was that most of my students translated Maxine's story into a sort of Horatio Alger story in which Maxine eventually "chooses" American culture over her mother's

tyrannical nostalgia for China and, therefore, gains the freedom to rise in America. Persistently, most of the students saw culture as a finite, reified object about which choices could straightforwardly be made, rather than as a surrounding process, in which consciousness is immersed, and which defines and constrains choices. Thus, they saw the Chineseness of Maxine's mother as merely an inhibiting imposition on Maxine, which they likened to the way some parents impose religion on their children. Children, or certainly young adults, most of the students agreed, should be allowed to "freely" choose which of the cultural traditions of their families they would want to accept and which reject. In essence, they were blaming Maxine's mother for being Chinese, and admiring Maxine's will to resist that Chineseness and become American.

However, this dominant drift of interpretation was not, except perhaps in its crudest outlines, the fixed, immobile "ideology" that I had anticipated I would try and turn Kingston's text against. Indeed, my class's response was far more mixed, ambivalent, and incomplete than the term ideology suggests, with its connotation of coherent formal system. In retrospect, the shape of student readings is better described by the special sense that Raymond Williams attributes to the concept of hegemony: the sense of a fully lived process that "does not just passively exist as a form of dominance . . . . [but] has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified" (112), and which, if change is to be accomplished, must be "confront[ed] . . . in the fibers of the self" (212).

This lived sense of hegemony was especially apparent to me in the student-directed classes where I could listen more closely and students seemed more willing to acknowledge their confusion. Repeatedly, for instance, students complained about the disconnected nature of the stories in The Woman Warrior, about the way dreams and reality were often blurred in Maxine's accounts of her past. For most students this was immensely frustrating, and, for a few, it merely confirmed their sense of Chinese culture as simply "weird," a locus of exotic unreason. But for some students acknowledging their confusion triggered an identification with Maxine's pain, a realization that Maxine cannot simply choose to assimilate without denying something already a part of herself.

Also, the students' readings of The Woman Warrior frequently shifted as they identified with the text from different positions as readers. Some of the same students who blamed Maxine's mother for imposing Chinese culture on her children also faulted Maxine and her siblings for being "brats" towards their parents. Students read differently when they were reading as children than they were as prospective parents than they were as prospective professionals.

What really disappointed me, though, about our reading of this book was not that my students didn't by some miracle perform my misreading of The Woman Warrior. What disappointed me was that this underlife of ambivalence never congealed into coherent alternatives to the ready mythology of American immigration, which, I thought, perpetuated the cultural invisibility of large

numbers of people in America. And, perhaps more important, I was starting to feel like my commitment to dramatizing students' interpretive authority over the material in the class was inhibiting us from carrying on the real critical work of the class: the work of cultivating these ambivalences in my students' readings into coherent alternatives, and fracturing the dress-for-success, anybody-can-make-it-if-they-adapt mythology which transfers blame for the failure of some groups to "make it" in America from institutions to those groups themselves.

My experiments in this class have led me to reconceive the terms in which I have usually heard teachers discuss their roles in a liberatory pedagogy. First, literature teachers and students, I think, have traditionally been socialized to think of literature in some ideologically purified sense, as somehow above the temporal fray of historical conflict. The movement to institute multicultural curricula surely has challenged that view, but even as we reconstruct literature to include historically marginalized voices, we often fail to challenge those aspects of disciplinary hegemony that we have internalized as teachers of "English." I acted, for instance, as if teaching historically excluded writers would itself challenge the sociological forces which have produced marginalization. When I committed myself to dramatize the students' authority over the material of my own class, I was thinking of the material of the class as primarily consisting of the literature, and not the historical perspectives on immigration and racism that I was advancing the literature to promote. Insofar as I regarded the

ethical position I had wanted to represent as secondary, I had internalized the disciplinary hegemony which says that literature speaks for itself, that literature and occasionally the historical "background" that demonstrates the artistry with which an author has shaped historical materials, is the stuff of English classrooms.

Second, my experiment with a student-centered critical pedagogy has led me to consider the rhetoric of literary prose, as well as my own role as rhetor in the classroom, more honestly and openly. Often, accounts of critical pedagogy picture idealized scenes in which the exercise of "dialogue," "reason," or "debate" seem to lead naturally, with only limited direction by the teacher, to the critical consensus of the class around enlightened political stances and the rejection of "false consciousness" (Shor, 98-101, 121, 172; see also Shor's partial revision of his original position in his new preface, xi, xii). However, in many modern university settings, we are teaching students who have survived school tracking, standardized tests and other exclusionary mechanisms that insure they have at least partially assimilated the styles of thought and expression of what various theorists have called the professional middle class (Ehrenreich, 3-15, 259). Dale Bauer has recently described one feature of this style of thought as what she calls the public/private split: our students, and often teachers too, see "[d]ecision-making in the realm of ethics and values (the stuff of the humanities classroom) . . . as intensely intimate, insular, isolated from . . . the public voice of politics,

business, and multinational capitalism" (387). If Bauer is right, then any pedagogy that employs literature as a way of challenging the public voices of politics, business and multinational capitalism runs straight into the teeth of this ideological separation of public and private. In this context, rather than expecting "dialogue" to lead to a self-evident critical consensus in the classroom, we should expect dialogue to become a medium of considerable tension and resistance, a means of articulating the gaps in understanding, often irreducible gaps, between teachers and students, and sometimes among students themselves.

Bridging the gap between public and private selves in our classrooms, however, is a considerably more difficult task than our simply owning up to our roles as rhetors in the classroom. Arguing about what useful truths might serve as an antifoundationalist basis for our rhetorical authority as teachers is likely to be, as Pat Bizzell has recently suggested, a painful and disorienting process for our profession (674). It is not simply a matter of a traditionalist return to rhetoric as the master discourse of English studies, as it were performing under a different stripe. I think my experiment with Jane Tompkins' pedagogy of the distressed was ultimately distressing for me because I took her criticism of the performance model of teaching as a criticism of conscientiously wielding our social authority as teachers. One can not be a rhetor in the classroom and not perform. However, now I see Tompkin's article as criticism of certain kind of performance, one bound up with dominant models of disciplinary expertise that separate our

objects of study from their uses, that separate who we and our students are outside the classroom from who we are inside. In the class that I have been describing, my students' ambivalences were no where more apparent to me than in the student-led classes. Most of our students, I would suggest, have developed school voices for speaking to teachers in which they attempt to silence, or at least keep under tight control, the dissonances and ambivalences that embody their lived senses of cultural hegemony. If we as teachers are to elicit that lived sense, we must provide spaces in our classes for it to emerge. To merely elicit ambivalence, however, is merely to affirm and reproduce the terms of hegemony. At some point, we need to make the critical and reconstructive turn wherein we confront and attempt to work through internalized social contradiction. And we need to talk to one another about the contradictions we uncover and what socially beneficial resolutions we should work for. I hope this paper is a step in the initiation of that dialogue.

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